



## The People paradox: Self-esteem striving, immortality ideologies, and human response to climate change

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### Abstract:

In 1973, Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist cross-trained in philosophy, sociology, and psychiatry, invoked consciousness of self and the inevitability of death as the primary sources of human anxiety and repression. He proposed that the psychological basis of cooperation, competition, and emotional and mental health is a tendency to hold tightly to anxiety-buffering cultural world views or "immortality projects" that serve as the basis for self-esteem and meaning. Although he focused mainly on social and political outcomes like war, torture, and genocide, he was increasingly aware that materialism, denial of nature, and immortality-striving efforts to control, rather than sanctify, the natural world were problems whose severity was increasing. In this paper I review Becker's ideas and suggest ways in which they illuminate human response to global climate change. Because immortality projects range from belief in technology and materialism to reverence for nature or belief in a celestial god, they act both as barriers to and facilitators of sustainable practices. I propose that Becker's cross-disciplinary "science of man," and the predictions it generates for proximate-level determinants of social behavior, add significantly to our understanding of and potential for managing the people paradox, i.e., that the very things that bring us symbolic immortality often conflict with our prospects for survival. Analysis of immortality projects as one of the proximate barriers to addressing climate change is both cautionary and hopeful, providing insights that should be included in the cross-disciplinary quest to uncover new pathways toward rational, social change.

**Source:** Ask your librarian to help locate this item.

### Resource Description

#### Communication:

resource focus on research or methods on how to communicate or frame issues on climate change;  
surveys of attitudes, knowledge, beliefs about climate change

A focus of content

#### Communication Audience:

audience to whom the resource is directed

Public

#### Exposure :

## Climate Change and Human Health Literature Portal

weather or climate related pathway by which climate change affects health

Unspecified Exposure

### **Geographic Feature:** ☒

resource focuses on specific type of geography

None or Unspecified

### **Geographic Location:** ☒

resource focuses on specific location

Global or Unspecified

### **Health Impact:** ☒

specification of health effect or disease related to climate change exposure

Mental Health/Stress, Morbidity/Mortality

**Mental Health Effect/Stress:** Mood Disorder

### **Resource Type:** ☒

format or standard characteristic of resource

Research Article, Review

### **Timescale:** ☒

time period studied

Time Scale Unspecified